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ABSTRACT

During May of 1985, an external audit team was engaged by the Lorain (Ohio) City Schools to assess implementation of the seven correlates of an effective school. The correlates, developed by the Ohio State Department of Education, included: (1) a sense of mission; (2) strong building leadership; (3) high expectations for all students and staff; (4) frequent monitoring of student progress; (5) a positive learning climate; (6) sufficient opportunity for learning; and (7) home-school relations. All three high schools within the system were asked to rank order the correlates to reflect the specific values of an individual school. Objectives 3, 4, and 7 were emphasized. The audit team spent one day in each school to verify the extent to which each school had been successful in implementing the correlates. Methods of gathering data included interviewing faculty, counselors, students, and administrators, as well as informally observing classes in session, patterns of student movement, use of school facilities, and the interaction among students and between students and teachers. In addition to the observation, the following additional sources of data were examined: accrediting agency reports, school newsletters, local news coverage, and students' test scores. (Author/GDC)

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Implementing Effective Schools Research: The Audit Process
High School Observations

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Implementing Effective Schools Research: The Audit Process

Abstract

During May of 1985, an audit team composed of personnel from Bowling Green State University was engaged by the Lorain (Ohio) City Schools to assess progress made by the school system toward implementation of the seven correlates perceived to be the essential elements of an effective school. The correlates, developed by the Ohio State Department of Education include: 1) a sense of mission; 2) strong building leadership; 3) high expectations for all students and staff; 4) frequent monitoring of student progress; 5) developing a positive learning climate; 6) sufficient opportunity for learning; and 7) home-school relations.

Each school within the system was asked to rank order the correlates to reflect the specific values of an individual school. The audit team sought to verify the extent to which each school had been successful in implementing the correlates. Several methods of gathering data were employed and included interviewing faculty, counselors, students and administrators, observing classes in session, patterns of student movement, use of school facilities, and the interaction among students and between students and teachers. Examination of the recent reports of accrediting agencies, perusal of school newsletters and local news coverage, and the examination of student test scores augmented first-hand observation.

I. Introduction

During May of 1985, an audit team composed of personnel from Bowling Green State University was engaged by the Lorain City Schools to assess progress made by the school system toward implementation of the seven correlates perceived to be the essential elements of an effective school.

This section of the report will deal with perceptions of progress being made by the three high schools toward implementing the Effective Schools model. These perceptions, to be described in detail, were gleaned through on-site interviews and observation covering a period of three days.

Lorain's three public high schools, Lorain High School, Admiral King High School, and Southview High School, house grades nine through twelve. Lorain is a city whose broad multiethnic population is represented in the student bodies of the three high schools. The schools range in size (nearly 1,100 at Southview) to nearly 1,400 students at both Lorain and Admiral King. All three schools offer programs designed to provide vocational training, special education, a background in general studies, and a preparation for college.

II. Preparation for the Audit

The Ohio State Department of Education developed a set of seven correlates representing the essential elements inherent in the Effective Schools model in an effort to facilitate the implementation of the model. These correlates included: 1) a sense of mission; 2) strong building leadership; 3) high expectations for all students and staff; 4) frequent monitoring

of student progress; 5) developing a positive learning climate; 6) sufficient opportunity for learning; and 7) home-school relations.

During 1983, the Lorain City Schools began the process of implementing the seven correlates in both the elementary and secondary schools in the district. Preliminary data relative to how the seven correlates were perceived by teachers and administrators were collected during the subsequent two years. The composite of these perceptions served as a needs assessment from which a strategy was developed and designed to implement the Effective Schools model.

Following the implementation of the model, the Lorain City Schools determined that it would be advisable to conduct an audit prior to a more formal evaluation being made. This audit, to be undertaken by a team from outside the school district, was designed to assess the effectiveness of the implementation strategy to date.

In preparation for the audit, the personnel of each elementary and secondary school were asked to establish a list of priorities from among the seven correlates. This ranking was to reflect only the values of the personnel of a particular school, not a system-wide view. Although the rank ordering of priorities was completed independently, the three high schools had nearly identical lists. Each school listed "Home-School Relations" as the highest priority. Lorain Admiral King and Lorain High listed "High Expectations for All Students and Staff" second and "Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress": third, while Lorain

Southview reversed these two in order of importance. It should be noted that in one instance, "Home-School Relations," Lorain High and Southview chose to title the category "Parent-Community Relations." This was a change in nomenclature only.

Due to the limited time to be spent in each high school and to the similarity of the ranking of the most important correlates, the audit team decided to focus attention upon these three. The other four correlates were to be considered as time would allow. This approach appeared prudent in view of the fact that the audit process is not an evaluation, but a method for the school system to receive independent feedback regarding its progress toward implementing the model.

The method of verifying the extent to which each correlate had been implemented was the key to the audit process. Verification was achieved through a variety of methods including: 1) interviewing students, involved in a cross-section of school programs (teachers, and administrators); 2) observing patterns of student movement, classes in session, the use made of various school facilities, such as the media center, and the interaction among students and between students and teachers; 3) taking note of general appearance of the school; 4) examining recent reports of accrediting agencies, such as the North Central Association; 5) reading school newsletters, indications of school coverage in the local newspaper, and other examples of communication with the community; and 6) examining documents prepared by each school describing their efforts to implement the correlates.

This method of gathering verification data from several sources led to a greater understanding of the efforts being made in each school and of the extent to which these efforts had resulted in the implementation of the Effective Schools model.

III. The Process

The two observers spent one full school day in each high school. Appointments had previously been made to see the building principal upon the team's arrival.

The observers interviewed each principal focusing upon that school's priorities from the seven correlates of the Effective Schools Model. Although each principal was asked the same basic set of questions, the observation team freely asked additional clarifying questions to probe the administrators' answers for clarity and greater depth. The meetings with the principals lasted from 45 to 60 minutes.

At the initial interview, special requests were also made for documents related to the effective schools criteria, such as, North Central Evaluations, school handbooks, annual reports, attendance records, and school-community publications. During the initial interview, the principal was also asked to arrange for meetings with two or three groups of students during the day. Prior to the visit, the principal was asked to arrange a series of six to eight teacher interviews. Immediately following the interview with the principal, the two observation team members met for 20 to 30 minutes to peruse the written documents for clues to areas of potential exploration.

The rest of the day was spent in three forms of information gathering: teacher interviews, student interviews, and wandering the building.

Teacher Interviews

Interview appointments were scheduled with individual teachers. Usually these were department heads, as they were most likely to be knowledgeable about curricular changes and practices of monitoring student progress. In each building, additional informal conversations were initiated with other teachers. Generally, the faculty members appeared most candid in presenting the positive as well as negative attributes of their schools. The audit team listened for trends which emerged in the interviews with the teachers and attempted to corroborate them with other data. For instance, in one building several teachers expressed a dissatisfaction with student absenteeism, yet further examination of annual reports revealed that their building's attendance rate was no lower than those of the other high schools.

Another incongruency which emerged in the teacher interviews was that contrary to the claim made by the building principal that a formal homework policy existed requiring that homework be assigned and that 15 to 20 minutes of each class period be devoted to working on it, few teachers claimed to be following that practice.

Student Interviews

The audit team met with two or three groups of students in each building. These were usually in assigned classes. Care was taken that a range of ability levels was represented. Their

teachers were not present for the discussions. After reassurances of the anonymity of their responses, the students were most open in their comments. Indeed in most situations, it took more probing to elicit their positive perceptions than their negative ones. These discussions also proved fruitful in providing direction for further exploration. For instance, in one school students repeatedly reported that they only visited the school library when absolutely necessary because the librarian was seen as overly authoritarian. Follow-up discussions with the building administrators reinforced that there was some validity to the students' claims and that efforts were being made to make the library more inviting.

Another interesting finding emerged in the student discussions at one building. The particular building had a high minority enrollment and included the lower socioeconomic segments of the community. A strong esprit de corps among the student body was revealed in the discussions. The students in this school perceived that they were looked down upon by the rest of the community. This common bond engendered a strong sense of school loyalty.

Informal Observations

The last approach was conducted in the style of Theordore Sizer as depicted in High School or that urged upon school administrators by Tom Peters in his best seller, A Passion for Excellence.

Recognizing the inherent limitations of impressions formed by "wandering the building" it is a valuable source of information about a school's learning environment, information that may rarely be revealed by questionnaires or other objective instruments.

Although words like "aura" and "ambiance" may send chills down the spine of evaluation purists, they do exist at least as personal impressions of students, parents or visitors entering any school building. Such impressions are created by the general noise level, the amount of between class hall traffic, the amount of graffiti, litter, and vandalism in the building, the interactions between teachers and students between classes, the cheerfulness of the decor, interruptions and disruptions. Visiting several buildings within a few days, the individual "personality" of each school quickly emerges.

The audit team well recognizes the limitations of attempting to generalize based upon such a sample of informal observations. However, such visitations can stimulate questions and hypotheses which might otherwise be overlooked. For example, in each school the members intentionally visited the restrooms used by students (at least the males in the case of the high school). In one building, the smoke hung in a dense cloud. That stimulated questions to students, revealing intense student dissatisfaction with the stench created in both the girls' and boys' restrooms. Repeatedly, the perceived helplessness of resolving the issue emerged in discussions with students, faculty and administrators. The attempt to solve the problem was limited to removing all partitions in the restrooms and locking most of them during the school day, directing all traffic to two or three "easily patrolled sites." The principal admitted the need for improved ventilation in the restrooms but indicated that adequate funds were not available.

IV. Conclusion

As can readily be seen, the audit process does not result in an evaluation. It provides feedback regarding what exists and evidence of progress being made toward the achievement of a goal. Due to the methodology employed and to the nature of the project, the evidence obtained does not result in the formulation of "hard" data. Instead, when combined with more traditional methods of evaluation, such as student test scores on a variety of achievement batteries, these impressions lead to a more complete descriptive analysis of school effectiveness.

The observational method of obtaining feedback has been used effectively by several individuals who have recently reported on the current status of the schools. Theodore Sizer visited more than 80 schools in 15 states and used tours of the schools, meetings with principals, and conversations with students and teachers as the basis for much of the analysis found in Horace's Compromise. John Goodlad made use of a variety of means to obtain the data found in A Place Called School. In addition to the usual "hard" data sources, observational schedules were employed and teachers, students, administrators, and parents were interviewed. Ernest Boyer focused on students, teachers, and subject matter in much the same manner as Sizer for the picture that he presented of the public schools in High School. He looked for student behavior that demonstrated learning, assessed the role of the principal, and talked with principals, teachers, students, and parents. Vito Perrone used many of the same sources to formulate a picture of the secondary schools chronicled

in Portraits of High Schools. Observers were provided with an outline of the purposes of the Carnegie Study and extensive demographic information related to the school upon which they were reporting. Final analysis reflected a combination of shared observer reactions and their individual interpretations.

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